

The 1863 Melbourne Shakespeare War

Barry Sullivan, Charles and Ellen Kean, and the Play of Cultural Usurpation on the Australian Stage

KATE FLAHERTY & EDEL LAMB

Australian National University & Queen's University Belfast | kate.flaherty@anu.edu.au &
e.lamb@qub.ac.uk

This essay investigates an intricate drama of cultural identity in performances of Shakespeare on the nineteenth-century Melbourne stage. It considers the rivalry between Charles and Ellen Kean and their competitor, Barry Sullivan, for the two-month period in 1863 during which their Australian tours overlapped. This Melbourne Shakespeare war was anticipated, augmented, and richly documented in Melbourne's papers: *The Age*, *The Argus* and *Melbourne Punch*. This essay pursues two seams of inquiry. The first is an investigation of the discourses of cultural and aesthetic value laced through the language of reviews of their Shakespearean roles. The essay identifies how reviewers register affective engagement with the performers in these roles, and suggests how the roles themselves reflected, by accident or design, the terms of the dispute. The second is concerned with the national identity of the actors. Kean, although born in Waterford, Ireland, had held the post of Queen Victoria's Master of the Revels and identified himself as English. Sullivan, although born in Birmingham, was of Cork parentage and was identified as Irish by both his supporters and his detractors. This essay tracks the development of the actors' national and artistic identities established prior to Melbourne and ask how they played out on in the context of the particularities of Australian reception. It shows that, in this instance, these actors were implicated in complex debates over national authority and cultural ownership.

Keywords: Shakespeare, nineteenth-century Melbourne, Barry Sullivan, Charles Kean, Ellen Kean, performance cultures

I shall be very glad to get away from these Colonies. I have had enough of them. I am pleased to have seen them but never desire to see them again.... As a general rule the people here are a very second and third rate lot and their antecedents are no hindrance to their advancement.

Charles Kean, St. Kilda, 24 May 1864.

This is our last whole day in Australia and I never left any place with so little regret.

Ellen Kean, Sydney, 3 July 1864.

Charles and Ellen Kean's nine-month theatrical tour to Australia was not a happy one. They were plagued by ill health, lambasted mercilessly by the *Melbourne Punch*, and had 'dirty tricks' practised upon them by their one time co-star but now competitor, Barry Sullivan.¹ Sullivan, having arrived in Melbourne only a year before the Keans, managed the Theatre Royal and had already established his reputation as a popular fixture when, in October 1863, George Coppin brought the Keans to Melbourne to perform at the newly established upmarket Haymarket. On the Keans' arrival a bitter controversy erupted and was sustained for the two-month period during which their tours overlapped in 1863. This Melbourne Shakespeare war was anticipated, augmented, and richly documented in Melbourne's papers: *The Age*, *The Argus* and *Melbourne Punch*. Described as a 'fierce war' in one account, reviewers were divided between viewing the rivalry as 'managerial' dispute and as 'theatrical excitements in Melbourne [...] greater than ever'.²

The Melbourne Shakespeare War presents a network of seams of possible inquiry, each of which tracks through multiple strata of aesthetic, cultural, and political history. This essay pursues two of those seams. The first is Shakespeare. Both Sullivan and Kean performed outside the Shakespeare repertoire in their overlapping seasons but it was comparisons of their Shakespearean roles that formed the hottest area of contention. This essay investigates discourses of cultural and aesthetic value laced through the language of reviews. It begins by identifying how reviewers register affective engagement with the performers in these roles, and forms an hypothesis about how the roles themselves reflected, by accident or design, the terms of the dispute. The second seam of inquiry is concerned with the national identity of the actors. Kean, although born in Waterford, Ireland, had held the post of Queen Victoria's Master of the Revels and identified himself as English. Sullivan, although born in Birmingham, was of Cork parentage and was identified as Irish by both his supporters and his detractors. The Australian tour was part of the Keans' and Sullivan's wider touring practices throughout Britain, Ireland and America. For the Keans, their time in the Australian colonies was brief and ill-fated. Sullivan experienced some initial difficulties in settling in to Melbourne but during his four year residence there became accepted to the extent that he was proclaimed 'our' actor. The latter part of this essay tracks the development of the actors' national and artistic identities established prior to Melbourne, especially Sullivan's perceived 'Irishness', and ask how they played out on the Melbourne stage. Sullivan and the Keans, like many actors of the period, toured primarily for money. Yet, as Richard Foulkes points out, many were 'inevitably implicated in the spread of British hegemony'.³ This essay will show that these particular actors were implicated in complex debates over national authority and cultural ownership in this instance. It will suggest that these performances of Shakespeare and the affective engagement of reviewers and audiences offer a distinctive narrative of cultural usurpation in nineteenth-century Melbourne.

Theatre Reviews in Nineteenth-Century Victoria

Theatre reviews are the chief source of information upon which this inquiry draws. Both *The Argus* and *The Age* published theatre reviews in a regular column up to six times a week. During the period of the controversy these columns were more

consistently detailed and animated than in the periods immediately preceding and following the Keans' arrival in Australia. The *Melbourne Punch* also reflects, throughout this period, a marked preoccupation with the theatrical rivalry. Reviews are a notoriously partial and ideologically biased form of evidence for the ephemeral event of performance. This begs the question of whether we can ever read anything more than their surface. Can we glean the details of interpretative choice from them? Can we imagine Barry Sullivan's Richard III, Charles Kean's Cardinal Wolsey, or Ellen Kean's Lady Macbeth? To a degree more than is usually possible, we can. Because of the peculiar conditions of this controversy and the extant documentation we can generate a detailed micro-history, a 'thick description', of the Melbourne Shakespeare War. In the first place, the reviews often preface their aesthetic judgements upon specific performances by discussing issues of culture – of the world and of England in relation to Australia. In this way the reviewers declare their biases from the outset so that their subsequent aesthetic judgements can be mapped onto their ideological standpoints. Another aspect of the reviews that makes them a uniquely useful portal to the past is their statistical and emotional concentration. There are multiple reviews of performances in several roles by each of the actors. We have, for instance, Sullivan's Richard III compared to Kean's; Kean's Shylock juxtaposed with Sullivan's. Moreover, the detailed intensity of the reviewing is amplified by the excitement of having two international stars in town for a short period, and by the journalistic and theatrical rivalry this provoked. These combined factors make it unusually easy to read between the lines and to experience something of the affective intensity of specific theatrical moments.

That being said, several surface characteristics of the reviews should be taken into account before pursuing an attempt to look through them to the past event. These characteristics might be classified as habits of thought in the nineteenth-century reviewer and identifying them has assisted us to orientate ourselves within the form. First, reviewers in both *The Age* and *The Argus* hold up uncritically 'Shakespeare' and 'history' as supreme measures of the worth of performance. What the reviewers mean by these terms is self-contradictory. In one review, for example, additions to the Shakespeare text are censured on principle and yet the reviewer's highest praise is reserved for the actor's performance of Colley Cibber's innovations.⁴ *Henry VIII* is described as a closet drama, not fit for acting.⁵ Likewise the first two acts of *Macbeth* are deemed to offer little for the actor playing Macbeth.⁶ Richard III in Sullivan's interpretation is lauded as 'Richard as he lived' rather than that of Shakespeare's play.⁷ This exposes an ambivalence about the Shakespeare play-text which, nevertheless, fails to shake 'Shakespeare' as the gold standard. Moreover, in the vast majority of cases Shakespeare is referred to as 'our Shakespeare' and 'our poet' with no conscious account of the colonial context as distinct from that of England.

The second enigmatic thread of discourse in the reviews concerns their commendations of verisimilitude, both in set and acting. In all sources 'exaggeration' is condemned and 'naturalness', 'ease' and 'a tendency to repose' lauded.⁸ The commendation of naturalness however takes on a confusing quality because it is so often articulated in the language of visual art. The most lavish praise for Charles Kean's naturalness is expressed in commendation of his exquisite 'portrayal' of the role of Cardinal Wolsey and, as a life-like as a 'breathing canvas by Van Dyke'.⁹ 'Nature' like 'Shakespeare' is taken as a fixed standard but is, in practice, constantly repositioned to support the reviewer's point. Moreover, while naturalness, ease, and

repose are theoretically upheld as the high-water mark for artistic achievement in performance, the moments which seem to generate the deepest level of affective involvement for reviewers are those which showcase heightened emotion – spectacles of physical and emotional intensity.

These characteristics of reviews concern their surface. In identifying them we are analysing the review object, the trace, more than what it aims to capture—the performance itself. Now we move into much more contentious territory: the question of whether or not the review can conduct us beyond itself into the affective heart of the theatrical moment. In all previously identified measures of merit the performers are treated even-handedly: they are all commended for their fidelity to Shakespeare and to history, for their naturalness, and they are equally applauded and critiqued for their ‘points’ and for their resistance to or introduction of innovations. Several rhetorical projects – *The Argus* honouring the Keans and *The Age* favouring Sullivan become visible, but it is difficult to distinguish the calibre of one performer’s force above another’s. Only evidence of affective engagement of the reviewer and the audience of which he is a part allows us to penetrate beneath this surface and to imagine something of the event itself. Importantly, affective engagement is registered independently of the implied biases of the publications and so winnows out the officially adequate performance from that which has real force. Charles Kean’s quality as an actor is dutifully and lavishly acknowledged, inventoried in theoretical abstractions, and argued for as recognised in the great capitals of the world. In contrast, the qualities of Barry Sullivan and Ellen Kean are felt – they affect the bodies of the reviewers and are coded as existential force in the sudden collapse of syntactical, semantic and subject/object boundaries. By identifying and experiencing these aspects of the reviewers’ language we, as readers, may move to a deeper imaginative plane – becoming affectively present in a moment past.

To embark on such an audacious venture is first to identify likely indicators that the reviewer was moved by the actor’s performance. Implicit within the choice of the term ‘moved’ are its figurative and physical currencies. To be moved is to be unexpectedly changed from one state to another – positionally, emotionally, ideologically – by something that comes from outside the self. Several features of the reviewers’ writing betray this state. Tense and pronoun specificity break down – the reviewer shifts from describing what the actor did *as* the character to describing what he/she (ambiguously the actor/character) is doing. This often takes place within a densely detailed narrative that strives to capture simultaneous events such as the actor’s facial expression, gestures, tone of voice and the effect that these are having upon the audience. In short, the reviewer attempts to re-perform and thereby sequentialise elements of the temporally composite affective moment past. A final more simple and less reliable indicator of affective audience involvement is an account of intense audience response – applause, laughter and tears being the most obvious.

Affective Performance in the Haymarket and Theatre Royal

On Saturday 14 November 1863, Charles Kean played Richard III at the Haymarket and Barry Sullivan played Richard III at The Theatre Royal. This was one of several occasions on which Sullivan competitively anticipated the Keans’ repertoire – a move for which he had been chastised in *The Argus* and which won him the epithet

‘malicious’ in the Keans’ correspondence home.¹⁰ What it offers scholars of theatrical history, however, is a unique opportunity to compare reviewers’ and audiences’ responses to the two performers. Reviews in *The Age* and *The Argus* are of particular interest.¹¹ *The Age*, in a move which is characteristic of its ideological positioning, begins by distinguishing itself from the English reception of the role: ‘The Richard of Mr Kean is highly esteemed by the English admirers [...] and has been regarded as in the first rank of his Shakespearian performances. We cannot concur’.¹²

Australian audiences, the reviewer seems to suggest, can make up their own minds. The rhetorical patterning of the review suggests that there was something missing from the performance, but that the reviewer cannot say quite what it was. In a cyclic pattern Kean is praised for having a set of necessary qualities, but then criticised for an ill-defined shortcoming. For example, his performance is said to be ‘not without’ ‘striking beauties’, ‘truth’ and ‘refinement’ but lacking in the ‘thought’, the ‘Shakespearian intelligence’ for which he was otherwise known. Then again he is commended for ‘the wiles, the wit, the dissimulation, and ‘a great deal of the passion that will burst out from beneath the cloak of craft’, but then he was ‘too much like the painted monster on the pole’ to be consistent with Shakespeare’s character and ‘the villainy is too transparent, motiveless and wanting in consistency’. A key preoccupation in the nineteenth-century theatre review is the ability to make emotional ‘transitions’. It is for this that Kean is commended in the ‘passion that will burst out from beneath the cloak of craft’ but this is later modulated when the reviewer states that ‘some of the rapid transitions from cool craft to passion were finely given, but occasionally exaggerated’. It is very difficult to imagine from these contradictory evaluations, what Kean’s Richard was actually like. What is evident is that the writing is shaped by contradictory impulses: one to be fair to Kean by enumerating his obvious competencies, the other to pinpoint what was lacking. The crisis reaches a head, unpredictably, in a comment on Kean’s make-up. The reviewer states that ‘The deformity was not sufficiently visible to support the self-drawn picture of the Shakespeare text, or to shock lady spectators with the bad taste of Lady Anne’. Here, in relief, we see two nineteenth-century prescriptions for forceful performance: fidelity to Shakespeare, and provocation of affective response from the audience. Both of these qualities are left frustratingly undefined by the reviewer, but the frequency with which they are invoked as measures of performance in this set of reviews is worthy of note.

Perhaps the most telling comment on Charles Kean’s deficiencies comes in the form of praise for Ellen Kean. She is given a mere seven lines in the review:

The little that *The Queen* has to do in this play was very nobly acted by Mrs Kean. The aching heart was never more touchingly displayed, and the wail of the bereaved mother and her terrible cry of anguish as she is torn from her children, thrilled through the house with the force of an electric shock.

Comparatively brief as it is, in this short passage the performed moment becomes suddenly present for the reader. The reviewer’s writing upholds each of our specified indicators of affective engagement. A specific moment of performance is evoked in detail, past tense collapses into present tense and the actor is folded into the

character, as indicated by the ambiguous pronoun 'her'. Moreover, sensory confusion is introduced: an aching heart is 'touchingly' displayed and the sound of the actor/character's voice 'thrilled through the house like an electric shock'. It is as if, for the first time in writing the review, the reviewer affectively reconnects with the performative moment. Released from the contrary impulses which pervade his dutiful account of Charles Kean's Richard, his writing, in style and content, becomes a window to the performance.

In contrast, the commentary on Sullivan's performance of the role on this same evening in *The Age* is brief. The reviewer comments on Sullivan's deep 'knowledge of the character', his 'poetical, thoughtful and artistic performance' and his 'happy discrimination and judgement' in 'expressing the varied aspects of the character; and his natural rendition of 'transitions from studied craft to violent passion'. For more detail he refers to earlier reviews that so 'fully described his success in this most difficult character'.¹³ Sullivan had played Richard III on first arriving in Melbourne in August 1862 – a year before the Keans' arrival. *The Age* heaped praise upon this performance of the role at this time. Exhibiting each of the identified characteristics of writing which reflects affective engagement with the performance, the reviewer gives a blow by blow description of action, and conflates the character with the actor in reading interiority as if it were as visible as physical gesture:

Stung with rage and bursting with passion, the workings of the fiery soul were expressed in every movement. He was eager with the wild impetuosity of revenge and his hurried action, his quivering visage, and violent transitions showed that he felt and knew of the coming crisis of his fate.¹⁴

Who, after all, is the 'he' here? The critic begins to merge Sullivan and Richard as the tenor of his own account picks up urgency:

When sleep visited his eyelids, still the body was not at rest, and the terror struck into his soul by the vision of the ghost of the slain was palpable. The waking from the dream, and the fervid passage "Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!" was ejaculated in a manner which fairly brought the house down.

The reviewer sums up by describing a revolution of sympathy felt for a dying usurper and brave soldier: 'so well does the unscrupulous monarch play his regal part in his closing moments that we are tempted to regret the fatal pass of Richmond's sword which rids the earth of the royal villain'. Is Richard III or Barry Sullivan to be understood as the popular if unscrupulous and usurping monarch playing 'his regal part'? The review is productively ambivalent. The final clue to the audience experience is indicated in the description of applause. He was called for at the end of every act and 'at the termination of the drama he had to bow his thanks amid a perfect storm of applause'.

Given the tendency of *The Age* to carve out for itself a space of judgement independent of the cultural authority of reception abroad it is not surprising that the reviewer so whole heartedly commends Sullivan's performance. What is surprising is the degree to which the reviewer for *The Argus* concurs. The remarkable thing about Sullivan's performance of the role is the degree to which the journalistic sources, otherwise at odds with each other, cohere to render a moment of extraordinary affective audience engagement. In a characteristic move *The Argus* review opens by establishing its view as at odds with the popular reception of Sullivan's performance: 'speaking for ourselves we prefer the quieter scenes of Richard the Third [...] but the popular taste lies in the opposite direction, and the most boisterous passages of the tragedy were received last night with the most tumultuous demonstrations of applause'.¹⁵ Despite this staid opening, the gradual stylistic transformation of the review indicates that, in writing it, the reviewer was drawn ineluctably back into the excitement of the performative moment:

In the final combat with Richmond, Mr Sullivan showed the ruling passion of the character he portrayed strong in death. After a hand to hand encounter, conducted with an earnestness that carried the sympathies of the audience with it, Richard is partially disabled and sinks upon the ground, but continues to fight in this disadvantageous position, until an access of energy, *inspired by passion*, enables him to regain his footing. Then, fighting wildly, and with the unguardedness of desperation, he receives his death wound, is disarmed, and endeavours to grapple with and strangle his victorious enemy. Foiled in this, *and faint with the loss of blood*, he falls upon the ground breathing stertorously, but still holding death at bay by the *exercise of a resolute will*. Lifting himself on one arm, by a vigorous effort, he glares at his destroyer, and utters the malediction, "Perdition catch thy arm" &c, which exhausts him in the utterance. Deprived of the power of articulation, and still turning his eye *upon which the film of death* is gathering fast, towards Richmond, he spits at him, betrays by the intensity of the spasm which passes over his countenance the intensity of his vindictive hate, and its identification with his latest thought, and so yields up his ghost. This climax was powerfully wrought up, and brought the curtain down amidst vehement expressions of applause.¹⁶

At first Sullivan's performance is discussed in past tense and the actor and the character are distinguished from one another. Next, actor and character collapse into one 'he' and past tense shifts to the active present of emotional memory. It is remarkable to observe the way in which this reviewer's account gathers momentum as he remembers sequentially, details of the staging. In the climax of the review we see him re-performing a compelling present-tense spectacle, imagining that he sees or has seen 'the film of death fast gathering in Richard's eye'. Is it Sullivan's eye or the reviewer's mind's eye in which this film of death gathers? In the emotional onrush of recalling the event, the 'character' is produced as a complex composite of the text, the actor's offering, and audience member's emotional response.

Commentary on Ellen Kean's performances across a number of roles attribute similar qualities of affective immediacy to her performances. On her arrival, *The Argus*, ostentatiously supportive of the Keans throughout their visit, nominates Ellen as the greater talent: 'Great as is the fame of her husband in every land where the English language is spoken, by many she will be esteemed as perhaps the better actor and the finer artist of the two'.¹⁷ Importantly, this particular reviewer applies the term 'genius' to 'Ellen Tree'. Given that this and other reviewers stop shy of applying this term to Charles Kean, it is an uncharacteristically provocative move for *The Argus*. It undoes the usually masculine-trope 'genius' and effectively undoes the marriage – calling Ellen by her recognised maiden name 'Tree'. This partiality toward Ellen Kean is rarely reflected in the proportions of the reviews. Most reviews discuss Charles Kean's merits and weaknesses at length in abstract terms before giving one or two sentences of unequivocal praise to Ellen Kean by pinpointing a specific moment in her performance.

There are a few notable exceptions to the pattern. In one *Argus* review of *Macbeth*, Ellen Kean is, as usual, relegated to the second half of the article.¹⁸ However, following a cautious description of her husband having 'dressed the part with equal care and effect' Ellen Kean is described as achieving 'a still greater triumph' before the reviewer devotes an extensive passage to the details of that triumph. Lady Macbeth is identified as a 'test part' for the actor and Ellen Kean passes with distinction. The reviewer avers that is difficult to 'pick out one scene from another' because it was 'a grand impersonation from beginning to end'. He then proceeds to 'pick out one scene from another', mentioning several moments in performance for special praise. The banquet scene in which the ghost of Banquo appears (3.4) is singled out for particular attention:

So varied was the acting, so various and changing the attitude, so winning now and now pleading the silent appeals of glance and smile, and so sweet now and now so passionately remonstrating her address to Macbeth, down to her last despairing, affrighted, imperious order to the guests to separate were Mrs. Kean's throughout this most trying scene, that it is hard to conceive in what her Lady Macbeth could have been excelled by the most distinguished of the noble band who have before her won fame for themselves in this great part. No description, no faint praise, will convey to those not present any fair idea of what her Lady Macbeth really was.

And yet, as we feel the reviewer's language cracking under the strain of a complex embodied experience we do receive a hint of what Ellen Kean's Lady Macbeth 'really was'. The conjuring of present intensity by the repetition of the term 'now', the piling up of contradictory adjectives: 'despairing, affrighted, imperious' and the final rhetorical move of aporia, all give us as latter-day readers a sense of the affective intensities of this particular performance.

Rivalry: Artistic and National

The emotional tenor associated with Ellen Kean's performance is matched by the vivid colours of her own writing from the period. Her letters home to her daughter Mary in England bear traces of emotional force – not least of all when she describes the machinations of her arch rival, Sullivan. On 20 November 1863 she wrote:

Mr Sullivan has overshot his mark and has disgusted even his own clique by his vulgarity and malice and has offended the Governor. They have a Melbourne *Punch* here and in this publication they made very free with the Governor's name in connection with Mr Sullivan's and Papa's [Charles Kean's]. The vulgar fool had hundreds of copies of this attack struck off in the shape of large bills and posted them all over the town.¹⁹

The publication to which she refers is a parodic play-bill which draws attention to the perceived sycophancy of Governor Charles Darling towards the Keans and the rivalry between Kean and Sullivan. In celebration of the supposed peace brokered between the two theatrical stars by Governor Darling it proclaims that *The Rivals* will be performed at Government House starring the Keans, Sullivan and the Governor himself. The notice ends by stating that the Governor will play the part of Mrs. Malaprop to perfection. The chief insult in the piece is aimed at the Governor – comparing him to the moralising and socially inept widow of Sheridan's play – and yet Ellen Kean takes Sullivan's distribution of the 'joke' to heart, as improper conduct. Arguably the parodic piece did no more favours for Sullivan and the Theatre Royal than for the Keans but it drew out the ire of Ellen Kean in a way that puts the spotlight on the parity of her fierce and impulsive expression with Sullivan's vindictive pranks. On stage and off it was not Charles Kean, but Ellen Kean and Barry Sullivan who provided the emotionally charged spectacles and who figure as fairly matched combatants in the Melbourne Shakespeare War.

Given the extensive attention to this rivalry in print, it is clear that it extended beyond the personal. The terms of this competition incorporated the national as well as the artistic, as indicated in reviews of both parties' *The Merchant of Venice*. Stealing the Keans' thunder by opening *The Merchant of Venice* one night before them on Friday 30 October 1863, Sullivan was admonished in *The Argus*:

Prudence and modesty might alike have advised the management of the Royal to play away from the round of characters certain to be produced at the Haymarket during the brief season of the Keans; and if afterwards comparisons should be challenged between the merits of our visitors and those whom we are likely to have with us always, there would have been ample opportunity to award, and that perhaps with no niggardly hand, the meed of merit to which, with vivid recollections of the former before us, we should have found the latter well entitled. Mr Sullivan has preferred, however, to throw down the gage of battle, and to claim judgement on the instant.²⁰

The Argus reviewer here criticises Sullivan's competitiveness and suggests that the Keans should be insulated from direct comparison. Proceeding to comment on Kean's performance of Shylock, the one role for which Kean received unmitigated praise during his Australian tour, the reviewer notes his special emphasis on the pathos of dispossession. Reviews of this performance dwell on the stifled fury and resignation of the character glaring at his victors as he departs the stage. A 'leading trait in [Kean's] reading of the character' suggests *The Argus*' reviewer 'is his identification of himself with his nation. It is less the insults to Shylock, than the contumely heaped upon the chosen people, that he resents'.²¹ According to the chagrined reviewer, the Keans received a cold reception in Melbourne. Equally, as evinced in their letters home, the keynote in their response to Australia was resentment. Like Shylock, the Keans discovered themselves deprived of that which they perhaps believed to be their rightful inheritance.

Two things that stand out in these reviews are the assumption that Sullivan belongs in and to Melbourne; and the tacit suggestion that while the rivalry should not be 'obtruded on the theatre-going public', Sullivan's merits may well rival those of the Keans. This rhetoric of 'honouring' the Keans by creating a kind of cultural quarantine for them typifies the position that *The Argus* took throughout the controversy. One week before this *The Argus* had devoted a long opinion piece which opened with the question 'Why have not the Keans received among us the recognition to which they have an indisputable right?'²² The journalist proceeds in a moralising tone: 'it would indeed be ludicrous – if it were not very sad – that talent which has entranced the most fastidious in England in America should in Melbourne have been given to it only the comparatively cold reception it has yet received'. *The Argus* makes patent a posture of cultural inferiority, which evolves into an appeal that Melbourne audiences align their reception of the Keans with that of 'the most fastidious in England and America'.

The efforts of *The Argus* to compel praise for the Keans had the reverse effect, as is reflected in the *Melbourne Punch*. Six days later Kean was lambasted in a cartoon entitled 'One good turn deserves another' which depicts him peddling *The Argus*. Again on the eve of the Keans' departure for Sydney, *Melbourne Punch* published a piece called 'The Puff Conclusive' which parodied the partiality of *The Argus* in a hilarious manner:

Not only is he [Kean] the greatest actor who ever trod this or any other stage, he is the only one. The art of acting is born and will die with him. He is the Alpha and the Omega of his profession... He is a histrionic Collossus [sic], a Thespian prodigy, a theatrical miracle, and interpreter of Shakespeare, who dwarfs the poet he condescends to illustrate. Shakespeare is the pedestal, but Kean is the statue on the pedestal. As to the unfortunate person from whom Kean derived his name (although an actor of some repute in his day) his fame has completely been overshadowed by that of his son.²³

In subverting hierarchies of cultural succession to make his point – placing Charles Kean above Edmund Kean and above Shakespeare – the *Punch* journalist ironically

betrays an investment in the same and critiques the way in which reception of Kean has seemed to pervert its right course.

In looking at the treatment of the controversy in *The Argus* and in *Melbourne Punch* it is possible to identify two contrary colonial impulses. One is to exhort readers to align themselves with the recognised cultural authority of England and the other is to assert a right to independent judgement. This is a common feature of nineteenth-century theatre commentaries in Australia, which invoke the history of the performers' Shakespearean productions in England, via other reviews or via the writer's experience of attending London theatres to justify their authority as cultural commentators. A letter published in Sydney's *Empire*, for example, highlights the writer's experience as 'witness' of Sullivan's performances 'some years since in England' and draws on the 'highly eulogistic criticisms which the leading organs of the Press in England have passed upon Mr. Barry Sullivan's performance' to frame his praise of Sullivan's Sydney performances as 'the highest achievement of his genius which has yet been presented to us'.²⁴ The rhetoric of 'England' and 'us' is complicated and motivated by the status of these reviewers as colonial figures. Pivotaly, the concept 'Shakespeare' remains a neutral in this fractious debate.

Engagement with Shakespeare might, as Ken Stewart points out, offer an opportunity to celebrate Englishness in the colonial context.²⁵ The prologue to the Shakespeare medley performed on the 300th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth at the Theatre Royal in 1864 demonstrates the extent to which Shakespeare was, on occasion, equated with notions of 'home' in its claim that 'We never can forget the land that gave us birth [...] The home of world's bards'. The Shakespearean performances of the Keans were specifically identified by Joseph Jefferson as offering a nostalgic and imaginative return for 'Old Londoners' who 'could take their children to see the favourite actors who had delighted their fathers and mothers in days gone by'.²⁶ Yet the passage from *Melbourne Punch* and the constant repetition of terms such as 'our poet' and 'our Shakespeare' throughout the entire set of reviews, constitute a thread of discourse that lays claim to the works of Shakespeare even while it culturally distances the visiting English Keans. This raises the issue of artistic succession and the question of who has the right to interpret Shakespeare. In the case of the *Melbourne Punch* we receive a hint of resentment that the Keans considered themselves special successors to the crown of English culture. Other papers go further in belittling the reverence for the Keans as symbolic of the colonies' relationship to England. The *Melbourne Masonic Journal* directly dismisses *The Argus*'s concerns that the reception of the Keans could disgrace 'us in the eyes of Europe' by foregrounding, as you might expect of this publication, practical connections. It protests 'against the assertion that the success or non-success of Mr Kean can in anyway affect our social position in the home country' and asks satirically if 'a British merchant will, before he sends his consignments to Victoria inquire whether the consignee has been an admirer of Charles Kean's acting or not?'.²⁷

Yet it was not only *The Argus* that promoted the Keans as representatives of a superior English culture. In her letters to her daughter, Ellen Kean echoes the missionary discourse satirised by *Melbourne Punch* when she comments that Victorian audiences 'are incapable of distinguishing the delicacies of art' and boldly claims '*I dare say we shall revolutionize their taste*'.²⁸ Interestingly she highlights the main deficiency of this audience in the fact that 'They neither know when to laugh or when to cry and only do either when they cannot help it. They are terribly hard to move'.²⁹

It is specifically the audiences' lack of affective response to performance that Ellen views as inferior. In an implicit jibe at Sullivan, whose 'vulgarity and malice' against them is described in detail, Ellen notes that Victorian audiences are used to 'nothing but raving and extravagance. *Six feet of comely flesh, a big round voice and a showy wardrobe with a very limited amount of brains*'.³⁰ Ellen's letter, which simultaneously paints Sullivan as villain and vulgar fool, characterises his performance through a grotesque physicality and inferior intellect. This charting of a hierarchy of acting styles is further measured in national terms, when Ellen adds a note to this letter the following day: 'we have a hard struggle [...] The Irish party here are very strong, and they were dead against us. We have *completely overcome all opposition*'.³¹ Ellen's rhetoric imagines the ongoing rivalry with Sullivan in artistic and national terms.

Ellen's discursive framing of the Melbourne Shakespeare War is particularly interesting. In asserting the superior talent and intellect of herself and her husband, she not only delineates the inferiority of colonial audiences, she additionally evokes the theatrical, social and national dimensions of Sullivan's performances in the colonies. Her attention to his raving and physicality points to a mode of performance that is socially inferior as well as lesser in talent. Her reference to the opposition of the Irish party alludes to an important element of the support that Sullivan received in Melbourne. In a letter written a few days earlier, Charles Kean expands on the nature of this connection. He writes that the 'malicious opposition' they encountered 'emanated from the Low Irish party, wishing to support Mr. Barry Sullivan and Mr. Kite, Manager and Proprietor of the Theatre Royal'.³² This designation of Irishness as 'low', as an inferior social and national position, interestingly extends Ellen's class demarcation in terms of theatrical and national rivalries.

'Barry me bhoy': Sullivan, Irishness & Shakespeare Wars

The 'Low Irish party' did support Sullivan throughout his residency in Melbourne. When he arrived in August 1862 they organised a welcome night, described in *The Argus* as 'Mr. Barry Sullivan's fellow-countrymen' gathering in large numbers at the Theatre Royal to 'play a twofold compliment – to his ability as an actor and his nationality as a native of the green island'.³³ While one later commentary is more cautious in asserting Sullivan's Irishness, claiming 'he was a native of Birmingham, but it was generally believed in Ireland that he was a "son of the sod". In all probability he was of Irish descent', this review offers a straightforward interpretation of Sullivan as native Irish and as part of the community of Irish 'countrymen' in mid-nineteenth-century Victoria.³⁴ Sullivan, to a certain extent, furthered this association with this community by financially supporting Irish affairs. In September 1862 he contributed to funds to 'alleviate the sufferings of the poor peasantry of Ireland' and is reported in relation to this as 'An Irishman of transcendent talent'.³⁵ He was similarly embraced by the Irish contingent in Sydney when he visited there in October that year. *Bell's Life in Sydney* reports 'We are glad to find that the countrymen of Mr Sullivan are appreciating his genius, and purpose demonstrating that fact by a "Welcome to Sydney" – "*Cead mille failthe*," on Tuesday evening'.³⁶

The communal identification with Sullivan as Irish was not unique to his Australian tours. He originally embarked on his theatrical career in Ireland and it remained his base.³⁷ When Sullivan visited New York in 1875, Irish communities

welcomed him as one of their own. His performance of *Hamlet* at Booth's theatre was accompanied by 'spirited national music' from the Irish Regiment.³⁸ New York audiences, of course, were accustomed to responding to star actors along national boundaries. Questions of national and social identity underpinned the theatrical rivalry between touring English actor, William Charles Macready, and Edwin Forrest, representative of working-class Americans and evocative of the sympathies of the Irish immigrant community in New York. When both were scheduled to play *Macbeth* in May 1849, handbills distributed across the city asked 'WORKING MEN, SHALL AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE THIS CITY?'. This prompted more than 10,000 protesters to gather at the elite Astor Place Theatre. When riots broke out the national guard opened fire, killing 22 and injuring over 150.³⁹ The rivalry between Sullivan and the Keans in Melbourne less than fifteen years later did not result in such tragedy. Nonetheless the Astor Place Riots provide a suggestive model for the Melbourne Shakespeare War. Both reveal aspects of the deep interior of theatrical interpretation of Shakespeare's plays in the era, and of the way that those plays performed on the wider public stage of cultural politics.

Scholarship has identified artistic succession and cultural authority as the key issues at stake in the American incident, as middle and working class Americans asserted their ownership of Shakespeare and sought to wrest the plays from the English as a platform for emergent national identity and democratic ideas.⁴⁰ Similarly the commentaries on the rivalry in 1860s Melbourne, in reviews and in the Keans' letters, offer a narrative of the role of national, social and geographical identity in determining audience responses. The discourse of 'us' and 'them', local and visiting, is complicated in the case of the Australian colonies by the fact that neither of the actors is directly placed as local. Yet, interestingly, commentaries work to position Sullivan in that role. He is not only welcomed by those identifying themselves as part of an Irish community; his presence in Melbourne in advance of the Keans' arrival and his longer term residence there (he stays in Melbourne, with brief trips to Sydney, until 1866), facilitate his construction as representative of the local. Like the Keans, Sullivan faces difficulties on his arrival in the city, having 'to contend with depression, opposition and even misrepresentation', but by December 1863 he believed that his style and manner of performance 'had won' from audiences 'substantial patronage and support, as well as what the bills sometimes called "thunders of applause"'.⁴¹ The *Melbourne Masonic Journal* gestures towards this relationship between length of tour and theatrical success when it comments that 'Perhaps if Mr Kean were to reside in Australia for several years he might obtain a number of admirers'.⁴² Sullivan's longer term residency in Melbourne seems to be a crucial component in how his performances were received. *Melbourne Punch* goes further to implicitly position Sullivan as local when it comments wryly on the Keans' arrival that 'our Shakesperian education has been left to the miserable teachings of the BROOKES and BARRY SULLIVANS'.⁴³ It is perhaps no coincidence that two actors identified as Irish, Gustavus Brooke and Sullivan, are set in opposition to the representatives of English culture, the Keans. These actors who are culturally situated at a distance from the 'English' centre are claimed at this geographical distance as an integral part of performance cultures in the colonies. The extent to which Sullivan is aligned with this cultural identity increases when he leaves and after his death in 1891. In later accounts, Sullivan is lauded as 'our old friend'.⁴⁴ He is, therefore, at once embraced in the colonies as an 'Irishman' and as 'our old friend and favourite'.⁴⁵ In this respect, the support shown for him in numerous reviews and

by his audiences in the frequently 'crowded' Theatre Royal, is positioned against the praise for the Keans as superior representatives of English culture, inherent in *The Argus* style reviews and Keans' letters.⁴⁶

Yet, as these accounts suggest, Sullivan's states as either Irishman or local are implicit and uneasy ones that constantly evolved, especially once he had departed Australia. A farce written soon after his departure from Melbourne indicates this shifting national identification, again through the medium of Shakespeare. Robert Whitworth's *Catching a Conspirator* was frequently performed in Melbourne in 1867. This farce, based on gossip that Sullivan had at some point been mistakenly arrested in Belfast as a prominent Fenian, represented Sullivan quoting Shakespeare to prove his innocence. However, the more the character of Sullivan cites Shakespeare, the more it strengthens suspicions against him.⁴⁷ That knowledge of the English bard might distance Sullivan from this particular politicised version of Irishness highlights his complex positioning in national terms. In addition it emphasises, albeit comically, the extent to which the theatrical roles of these travelling actors affirmed their national status and, moreover, the ways in which this status is generated contextually and collaboratively in retrospective accounts of their performances in Melbourne.

This can be seen most clearly, perhaps, in a piece of journalism published over 100 years after the Melbourne Shakespeare War. On 31st March, 1986, Sydney's *Daily Mirror* published a 'historical feature' with the headline 'Richard III died in Melbourne like an "Irish gentleman"'. The piece is an unashamedly sentimental account of Sullivan's artistic triumph at the Theatre Royal as a performance of nationalist solidarity between and Irish actor and his Irish Australian audience. The feature cites several anecdotes whose origins are obscure.⁴⁸ One recounts a short silence on the raising of the curtain followed by a lone voice 'rich with the vogue of Munster, roaring: "Give it to 'em Barry me bhoy"' which confirmed for the actor that he was among friends in Australia. Another records the final combat in which 'the fury-maddened Richard fought the Earl of Richmond not only for his own life but for the crown of England itself' – a moment in which 'every Irishman in the audience' in a 'frenzy of excitement' 'cheered for Barry Sullivan', the journalist opining that 'Richard III might have been a villain but Barry Sullivan could do no wrong'. Finally, the piece records that 'one Irishman from the diggings said as he left the theatre: "He died like an Irish gentleman"'.⁴⁹ This retrospective account seems to draw together many latent possibilities of interpretation into a lucid and politically useful vignette. As noted, Sullivan's Irishness is registered several times in sources contemporary to his tour but never as purposefully as in this retelling that took place over a century later. The retelling gives the historical moment a poetic and ideological coherence that it lacked in contemporary accounts, but it also bears the traces of the intense emotional experience attributed to Sullivan's Richard at the time of his performance.

Theatre and Cultural Identity

It is a commonplace to proclaim that the theatrical moment is ephemeral and irretrievable. Yet in another sense it is indelible. It leaves an emotionally composite stain on collective experience which is as difficult to erase as it is to interpret. Barry Sullivan's Richard III played in Melbourne in 1862 and 1863 performed an important role on the stage of colonial culture. The combination of Shakespeare's virtuosic usurper villain, Sullivan's Irish-branded theatrical dynamism, and the

colonial predicament conspired to lend an affective utility to the staged moment which far exceeded its immediately available meaning.⁵⁰ This was further amplified by the presence of the English Keans and *The Argus*' unflagging support of them. It is at least possible that audiences 'cheered for Barry Sullivan' as usurper, not only of the English crown within the play, but as usurper of the crown of English culture – Shakespeare – from its sanctioned successors.

Cultural usurpation makes for a slippery narrative. It is a way of interpreting traces of affective experience from the past which is, ironically, only available to the future. It is unlikely that either the Keans or Sullivan or their audience or reviewers understood their predicament in the terms which we have provided for it. The very condition for a moment of intense emotion is that lacks interpretative definition. Yet it is precisely this overspilling quality, particularly in the collectively experienced emotion of the theatrical moment, which gives it its complex and lasting resonances and makes it a subject worthy of scrutiny. In the Melbourne Shakespeare War we encounter such a moment; in which Shakespeare's characters make their way onto the stage of Australian colonial history to play out an intricate and poignant drama of cultural identity.

NOTES

¹ Sullivan had previously performed alongside both Charles and Ellen Kean. His first Shakespearean role was Rosencrantz to Charles Kean's Hamlet in Cork in 1837. See Barry O'Connor, 'Sullivan, (Thomas) Barry (1821-1891)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26773>>, accessed 17 March 2011.

² *Examiner*, 17 Oct 1863; *The Argus*, 25 September 1863, pp. 6-7.

³ Richard Foulkes, *Performing Shakespeare in the Age of Empire* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 3.

⁴ In one instance the reviewer criticises that 'which has been imported into the tragedy for dramatic or melodramatic effect' but then goes on to quote and commend 'Perdition catch thy arm' and the extended death sequence from Colley Cibber's 1699 adaptation of the play. See *The Argus*, 23 August 1862, p. 5.

⁵ *The Argus*, 27 October 1863, p. 5.

⁶ *The Age*, 17 November 1863, p. 5.

⁷ *The Age*, 16 November 1863, p. 5.

⁸ *The Age*, 11 August 1862, p. 5 and passim.

⁹ *The Age*, 30 October 1863, p. 5.

¹⁰ *The Argus*, 2 November 1863, p. 5 and Charles Kean, Letter to Mary Kean 'Melbourne, November 17th, 1863' in J. M. W. Hardwick, (ed.), *Emigrant in Motley: The Journey of Charles and Ellen Kean in quest of a theatrical fortune in Australia and America as told by their hitherto unpublished letters* (London: Salisbury Square, 1954), p. 94.

¹¹ In our analysis we include reviews of Sullivan's performance on 16 November 1863 (*The Argus*, 16 Nov 1863, p. 5) and reviews of his performance in the same role at the Theatre Royal one year earlier (*The Argus*, 23 August 1862, p. 5 and *The Age* 22 Aug 1862, p. 5.)

¹² *The Age*, 16 November 1863, p. 5.

¹³ *The Age*, 16 November 1863, p. 5.

¹⁴ *The Age*, 22 August 1862, p. 5.

¹⁵ *The Argus*, 23 August 1862, p.5

¹⁶ Italics inserted.

-
- ¹⁷ *The Argus*, 12 October 1863, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ *The Argus*, 10 November 1863, p. 5.
- ¹⁹ Ellen Kean, Letter to Mary Kean 'Prince of Wales Hotel, St. Kilda, Friday, November 20th, 1863' in J. M. D. Hardwick (ed.), *Emigrant in Motley*, p. 99.
- ²⁰ *The Argus*, 2 November 1863, p. 5.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5.
- ²² *The Argus*, 23 October 1863, pp. 4, 5.
- ²³ *Melbourne Punch*, 19 November 1863, in J. M. D. Hardwick (ed.), *Emigrant in Motley*, p. 95.
- ²⁴ *Empire*, 20 October 1862, p. 5.
- ²⁵ Ken Stewart, 'Theatre, Critics and Society' in Harold Love (ed.), *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (Sydney, 1984), p. 65.
- ²⁶ Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (1889), in J. M.D. Hardwick (ed.), *Emigrant in Motley*, pp. 86-87.
- ²⁷ *Melbourne Masonic Journal*, 31 October 1863, cited in Robert Sillard, *Barry Sullivan and His Contemporaries: A Histrionic Record* (London, 1901), Vol. 2, p. 69.
- ²⁸ Ellen Kean to Mary Kean, St Kilda, 20 November 1863, *Emigrant in Motley*, p. 99. Italics in Kean's letters in original.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Ellen Kean to Mary Kean, St Kilda, 21 November 1863, *Emigrant in Motley*, pp. 100-01.
- ³² Charles Kean to Mary Kean, Melbourne, 17 November 1863, *Emigrant in Motley*, pp. 94-95.
- ³³ *The Argus*, 28 August 1862, p. 5.
- ³⁴ *The Argus*, 5 May 1891, p. 5.
- ³⁵ *The Argus*, 5 September 1862, p. 5.
- ³⁶ *Bell's Life in Sydney*, 11 October 1862, p. 2.
- ³⁷ Barry O'Connor, 'Sullivan, (Thomas) Barry (1821-1891)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26773>>, accessed 17 Mar 2011; Anthony Miller, 'Imperial Caesar: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* on the Australian Stage, 1856-1889', *Australasian Drama Studies*, Vol. 33 (1998), pp. 80-94.
- ³⁸ *The Mercury*, 3 December 1875, p. 3. See also Sillard, Vol. 2, p. 67.
- ³⁹ See Dennis Berthold, 'Class Acts: The Astor Place Riots and Melville's *The Two Temples*', *American Literature*, 71.3 (1999), pp. 429-61; Claudia D. Johnson, 'Burlesques of Shakespeare: the Democratic American's "light artillery"', *Theatre Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1980), pp. 49-62.
- ⁴⁰ See Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 761-65; Johnson; Lisa Merrill, 'Acting Like a Man: National Identity, Homoerotics, and Shakespearean Criticism in the Nineteenth-Century American Press', in Gail Marshal and Adrian Poole (ed.), *Victorian Shakespeares, Vol I: Theatre, Drama, Performance* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 82-98.
- ⁴¹ *The Argus*, 14 December 1863, p. 5.
- ⁴² *Melbourne Masonic Journal*, 31 October 1863, cited in Sillard, Vol. 2, p. 69.
- ⁴³ *Melbourne Punch*, 30 July 1863, p. 36.
- ⁴⁴ See *Empire* (Sydney), 4 July 1874, p. 3; *The Brisbane Courier*, 19 January 1878, p. 3.
- ⁴⁵ *The Brisbane Courier*, 20 April 1923, p. 3; *The Brisbane Courier*, 19 January 1878, p. 3.
- ⁴⁶ *The Argus*, 14 December 1863, p. 5.
- ⁴⁷ Lawrence, *Barry Sullivan: A Biographical Sketch* (London, 1893), pp. 56-57; Sillard, Vol. 2, p. 182.
- ⁴⁸ This article takes a number of liberties with factual details. For example, it states that Sullivan's opening performance of Richard III takes place on 1 July 1862. Yet Sullivan does not arrive in Melbourne until August 1862. His first performance is as Hamlet on 9 August 1862. He first performs Richard III on 21 August. See *The Age*, 1 August 1862, p. 1; *The Argus*, 11 August 1862, p. 5; *The Age*, 22 August 1862, p. 5; *The Argus*, 23 August 1862, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 31 March 1986, pp. 11-12.

⁵⁰ See Miller, p. 80.